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ABSTRACT

Nonnative English speaking students have usually felt intense pressure and loss of self-esteem in the typical English classroom in the United States. This is a direct result of America's longstanding distrust of foreigners, and the condescension with which the educational system has sometimes treated nonnative speakers. According to C. B. Stein, "the world view of teachers and administrators approaches history and culture as if both began in England and came to fruition in the United States." When nonnative speakers first began entering college in record numbers, many teachers who taught English as a Second Language (ESL) were not specifically trained in the field, and sometimes saw as problems what were really cultural differences in classroom behavior. For classroom English teachers, grammatical incorrectness has traditionally been a sore point, and many nonnative students make a lot more errors than native students--errors which usually cannot be explained by simple prescriptive rules. Thus frustrated university professors lay the blame for unsuccessful written communication on what is immediately obvious--incorrect grammar. Although recent ESL theory has grown in the same direction as mainstream composition theory, that is, away from preoccupation with error and toward an appreciation of content, it is difficult to reconcile knowledge about the existence of contrastive rhetoric with the goal of preparing students to follow academic conventions in the discipline of English and in other disciplines. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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OLD PEDAGOGIES: ESL STUDENTS AS PROBLEMS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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Paper presented at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Nashville, TN

ED 372 410

The purpose of this presentation is to review the history of how ESL students have been viewed as a problem in our educational system, particularly English class. I would like to begin by reading an excerpt from a paper written by one of my Chinese students, who describes what it felt like, back in 1982, to be a non-English speaking student in an English-speaking classroom. According to Howie, now a college student in Georgia:

> I began to hate and fear the morning light. I came to United States for a new life. Everything were new and strange to me. The streets, the people, society, and school system were all different from the world that I used to know. I was scare and interesting at the things around me. This school did not have ESL program so I was in a regular English class that did not help me too much. I did not know what to do in any of my classes because I did not know any English. I had a hard time to make any friendship. I was a dummy for the whole quarter.

Fortunately, Howie transferred to a different high school, which did have an ESL program. He continued:

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> I got into the regular English at my senior year, but it was too late for me to prepare for university. I was still fear with my English and did not take the SAT test. All my experiences from my high school year had a great impact for my life. The fear and the helplessness feelings made a different person out of me. I was very comfort with myself before I went to high school, but I was not the same person after high school. My high school years was part of bad dream in my life.

If this is a modern experience, one can only imagine the toll taken on self-esteem of the millions of ESL students who have passed through the U.S. educational system during the much more blatantly xenophobic times in our 200 year history. To understand the attitude of the school system, we should first examine America's general paranoia about foreigners, which goes back a long way.

Ishmael Reed suggests in his essay "America's Multinational Heritage" that America's general distrust towards "outsiders" can be traced back to the Puritans, who apparently forgot that they themselves were foreigners.

Reed writes,

> The Puritans are idealized in our schoolbooks as 'a hardy band' of no-nonsense patriarchs whose discipline razed the forest and brought order to the New World...the Puritans were a daring lot, but they had a mean streak...They punished people in a cruel and

> inhuman manner. They killed children who disobeyed their parents. When they came in contract with those whom they considered heathens or aliens, they behaved in such a bizarre and irrational manner that this chapter in American history comes down to us as a late-movie horror film. They exterminated the [Native Americans], who taught them how to survive in a world unknown to them, and their encounter with the calypso culture of Barbados resulted in what the tourist guide in Salem's Witches' House refers to as the Witchcraft Hysteria. The Puritan legacy of hard work and meticulous accounting led to the establishment of a great industrial society....but there was the other side, the strange and paranoid attitudes toward those different from the Elect (442-443).

The legacy that began with the Puritans was reinforced by many of the political events in our country's history. Brislin, author of Cross-Cultural Encounters notes that America's struggle for independence from Great Britain, its policy of isolationism and manifest destiny, even its acceptance of slavery, all contributed to our nation's fearful and distrustful attitude towards "outsiders." He writes,

> A product of these historical developments was that whites became comfortable with having their will accepted and with keeping blacks, as well as Indians and Mexican-Americans in a subservient position. This type of

> relationship became the norm, the 'correct' way of doing things, passed on from generation to generation with the consequent unquestioning acceptance which longevity entails... Consequently, [Americans] are somewhat inept at accepting people from other cultures as equals with a viewpoint worthy of attention (29,30).

President Theodore Roosevelt himself stated, "It would not be merely a misfortune, but a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country...we should provide for every immigrant...the chance to learn English, and if, after say five years, he has not learned English, he should be sent back to the land from whence he came." (qtd. in Stein: 1-2).

The San Francisco Chronicle printed an editorial in the early twentieth century, which denied "either the legal or moral obligation to teach any foreigner to read or speak the English language. It is a reasonable requirement that all pupils entering the schools shall be familiar with the language in which instruction is conducted" (qtd. in Stein: 122-123).

Although the U.S. is no more xenophobic than any other country, and has, in fact, been quite generous in its immigration policies and its willingness to assist foreigners, it is particularly paradoxical that the educational system has treated second language speakers with undisguised condescension.

In the past, second language students were openly labeled as inferior. According to the Dean of Stanford College of Education, foreigners from Eastern and Southern Europe were "illiterate,

docile, often lacking in initiative and almost wholly without the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency and government" (qtd. in Stein: 2). Latin, Asian and other European immigrants were assumed by the school systems to be retarded because they could not perform well on English IQ tests. In the Southwestern United States, Mexican children attended separate and inferior schools. According to Stein, "[Italian] children, too, were stigmatized by teachers' assumptions about genetic inferiority. Most were relegated to vocational tracks on the assumption that they had no capacity for intellectual development" (4).

According to Stein, "Since Anglo-American culture was the standard, other cultures were seen as substandard...[the] world view [of schoolteachers and administrators] approaches history and culture as if both began in England and came to fruition in the United States" (7, 9).

Ogbu notes in his book Minority Education and Caste:

> From the third decade of this century, Anglo psychologists began to 'confirm' [the mental inferiority of Indians, Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans] 'scientifically' by showing that they did not score as high as Anglos on IQ tests...Each group has traditionally received inferior education to prepare its members for their inferior social and technoeconomic positions in adult life (228).

Is it any wonder that ESL students from many ethnic groups

dropped out of secondary school at a high rate and were underrepresented at the college level? For example, according to a special report of the American Council on Education in 1969, the college population of the United States included only 0.6% Mexican Americans, 0.3 % Puerto Ricans and 0.1% Native Americans (13). Crossland notes that some of the main barriers to higher education included biased tests, poor preparation, and lack of money and motivation (55-74).

It was not until the social upheavals of the 1960's challenged the U.S.'s traditionally Anglocentric stance that ESL students started to attend college in larger numbers. "The slogan 'Black is beautiful' was followed by 'Kiss me, I'm Italian' and 'I'm Polish and Proud'," writes Porter. "The renewal of ethnic sensitivity in the 1970's...became a celebration of tolerance" (159). And the organization known as TESOL was formally established.

As second language speaking students began to enter colleges in record numbers, many English professors, not quite used to this different strain of student, did not quite know how to help. And, in many cases, still do not.

LaPerla states that in the past, most teachers who taught ESL were not trained to teach second language students (3) and even today, writes Messec, "...most ESL teachers in public education have had little opportunity for any ESL training at all...In the typical public education ESL situation (other than the specialized case of university intensive ESL programs)

teachers certified in other subject areas are given ESL teaching tasks..." (19). According to Penfield, "Regular teachers ...sometimes express anger, frustration and unwillingness to deal with 'the new burden' placed upon them in having a few [ESL] students in their classrooms" (22).

One reason that ESL students may be falsely perceived by some teachers to be problems is because of cultural differences in classroom behavior. One of my colleagues recently mentioned that on the first day in her regular English class, one ESL student...of a certain nationality...had immediately confronted her with suggestions of how she might improve the class syllabus. My colleague perceived this as extremely rude until she was told that this student-teacher "consultation" was merely a cultural tradition for many students of that same nationality. On the other hand, we all know that in most Asian educational systems, students are expected to sit quietly and never speak in class. Recently, when I placed all the students in my regular English class into small groups which would lead 10-minute discussions on a different work of literature, the two Asian students in the class---both in different groups---could not bring themselves to speak even once. They sat in utter silence while the other group members led the discussion. Many teachers might wrongly perceive them as uncooperative, but the real problem was overcoming cultural inhibitions. In a recent study by Penfield, 162 teachers with no ESL training but with second language students in their classes were surveyed and Penfield concluded that "it appears

that the regular teachers lack of knowledge about [LEP] students can lead them to negative interpretations of their behavior, and these no doubt interfere with the learning process" (31). For example, "All comments which referred to Hispanic students were negative. These students were viewed as 'discipline problems'" (31).

Furthermore, grammatical incorrectness has traditionally been a sore point with most English teachers. And since most ESL students not only make a lot more of them than native students, but also make errors that cannot be explained by a simple prescriptive rule, teachers who are not trained in ESL are bound to view this as a problem. Land and Whitley point out that although most teachers claim that they

> wish ESL students to acquire enough facility with standard written English to succeed in school and in the workplace...the prevalent methods of evaluating writing---especially in classes where ESL students compete directly with native speakers and where instructors have little or no training in teaching second language learners---suggest that we don't wish ESL students to attain only a 'facility' with written English; instead, we expect them to become entirely fluent in English...(284).

Teachers of ESL students have had the tendency to focus almost entirely on grammar and mechanics. "The belief was," according to LaPerla, "that the [ESL] student was an organism to

be conditioned until behavior was automatic" (5). Messec writes:

> Most foreign language teaching in the United States has been---and possibly still is---conducted on a grammar basis. That is, the teacher and students assume that by studying the grammar rules of the new language and adding vocabulary and some application work, the new language will be learned. The well-documented lack of success of this assumption has not changed the opinion of most teachers and students (15).

Furthermore, according to Reid, "frustrated university professors may---for want of a more precise way of articulating their frustrations---lay the blame for unsuccessful written communication on what is most immediately obvious: '...I think he needs work in grammar'" (221). A diagnosis of "incorrect grammar" is too-often used as catch-all diagnosis for other problems of miscommunication, such as the writer's lack of familiarity with academic conventions or, as Land and Whitley point out, non-conformity to Standard White English rhetorical patterns. "There are many patterns of cohesion, other logics, other myths through which views of the world may be constructed," the authors note. "[However] even with error removed from all essays, researchers have found that Native Speaker readers give higher scores to papers of Native Speakers than to those written by ESL students. Clearly, other important differences exist" (285, 286). Over the past 25 years, ESL theory has grown in the same direction as

mainstream composition theory---away from preoccupation with error and towards an appreciation of content.

Raimes reports that even though the theory of ESL teaching has moved in a positive direction, away from the limiting, teacher-centered, skills-and-drills pedagogy of the '60's, there have been many disagreements about how to teach ESL, largely because the choices have broadened and more questions have been raised. For instance, how do we reconcile our knowledge about the existence of contrastive rhetoric with our goal of preparing students to follow academic conventions in our own and other disciplines?

Raimes reminds us,

> There is no such thing as a generalized ESL student. Before making pedagogical recommendations, we need to determine the following: the type of institution...and the ESL student (undergraduate or graduate? freshman or junior? international student or immigrant/refugee? with writing expertise in L1 or not? with what level of language proficiency?) If we are to prescribe content, we need to ask, Whose content?...there are signs that we are beginning to recognize the diversity of our students and our mission...(420,421).

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